

A SLAVE LABORER IN SOVIET SIBERIA

A Personal Account

EMILIA LISS

*But, behold they will not believe me,
nor hearken unto my voice.—Exodus*

THE two NKVD men called for me a little before two in the morning. I was waiting for them. They had been arresting people in my neighborhood during the last forty-eight hours and I was aware that it might be my turn at any moment. I lay on my bed, fully dressed, with a packed valise beside me. Out in the street there was a lot of noise: the clanking of trucks, loud voices shouting names, bells ringing piercingly at the doors of houses. . . . My room was filled with the quiet of fear. Beams of light from reflectors glided softly over the dark walls. . . . Finally there was the sharp sound of the doorbell.

They were both tall, in fine uniforms and high boots, with revolvers strapped to their belts. One was a typical Russian, with light hair and blue eyes. The other a young Jew: black eyes, dark hair, hooked nose. Both looked sullen, and began to shout as soon as they got to the threshold:

"Make it quick! Get ready! We haven't much time."

"Where are you taking me?"

THE story here published is among the few first-hand accounts of life as a deportee in a Soviet slave-labor camp that have as yet reached the West. The writer, who for the protection of her relatives must conceal her identity under a pseudonym, is a native of Warsaw and a member of the Roman Catholic faith, though she is descended through one of her parents from an old Jewish family. Just before the German Army's entry into Warsaw, she fled to the eastern part of Poland, whence in 1940 she was deported by the Russians to a labor camp in Siberia. After her release in 1942, she spent some time in the Near East and is now living in one of the Western European countries. This article has been translated from the Polish by Lola Kinel.

"What? Don't you know?" said the blond one. "Why, you're returning to your own homeland, your dear Poland. It will be as cosy as paradise." They laughed loudly.

When they saw the valise they became suspicious. "Unpack it at once!" shouted one of them. And as I tried to unlock it, awkwardly, with clumsy hands because I was shaking so, he made an impatient gesture: "Come on! Hurry up!"

"What have you got there? Weapons, gold, watches?" asked the other.

"No. Just some clothes and underwear."

"Take as little as possible!" shouted the blond Russian. "You will receive everything where you're going."

But a moment later, when he left the room for a moment, the other man whispered to me: "Take all you can. Over there everything will be of use."

Finally we left. In a truck, with a lot of others, I was taken to the police station. Our documents were checked and then they drove us to the station. After some more red tape, I was put on a prisoner's train. I was quickly on my way to Siberia and forced labor.

THE place was a small town in the East of Poland. The time, June 1940. My crime—refusal of Soviet citizenship.

In the fall of 1939, after the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, when Germany occupied the western half of Poland and Russia the eastern half, streams of refugees, mostly Jewish and seeking safety from Nazi persecution, began to flood into the Soviet-occupied towns. There they settled down precariously to wait out the war, which by then seemed very far away in the West. Then, in the spring of 1940, a ray of hope appeared on the horizon. As the result of an agreement between the German and Rus-

sian authorities, a certain number of refugees were to be allowed to return to their homes in the West.

By June a number of German commissions had arrived in the three largest cities of the Eastern Zone: Lvov, Przemyśl, and Brzesc (Brest-Litovsk). Elegant, well-groomed officers now appeared on the dirty, neglected streets of these Soviet-occupied towns. And wherever they showed themselves they were instantly besieged by crowds of Jews begging for permission to return to their homes in Western Poland. This, no doubt, now seems incredible. But the truth is that at that time none of us, neither Jew nor Gentile, suspected the full extent of Nazi anti-Semitism. The general idea prevailed that only members of the German underground and certain prominent Jews, liberals, etc., were being sent to concentration camps. The ordinary, insignificant little people thought they were quite safe. Hence the spectacle, bitter in retrospect, of stiff, well-dressed German officers being stopped wherever they went by Jews begging for permits to return home. For the Polish Jews were by now mortally afraid of the Bolsheviks and the Germans looked "civilized" by comparison. The German officers were surprised, laughed loudly, and took pictures. Some of them said frankly that they didn't "advise anyone" to return to German-occupied territory, but this didn't impress the homeless Jews.

When the German commissions once began functioning, Jews mingled with Gentile Poles, trying to obtain false identification papers in order to get over the border. Very few of them succeeded in fooling the alert Germans, who had orders not to let any Jews re-enter the German-occupied sections. So that in the end only a small number of Jews—to their own ultimate and horrible undoing—got back to their old homes.

AFTER a few brief days of work the German commissions left rather abruptly. That was when the Soviet authorities stepped in and began their campaign to persuade the refugees to accept Soviet passports. As a

first measure all Polish citizens were declared officially Soviet nationals.

Now in Soviet Russia, the lack of a passport is a legal offense and the usual punishment is the deprivation of all rights and deportation to Siberia. The result of imposing Soviet nationality on the refugee Poles was that anyone who refused to accept a Soviet passport became automatically a criminal and thus subject to exile. But even when faced with this fate, the Poles as a rule refused to accept Soviet citizenship and preferred deportation. This included the great majority of the Polish Jews, although acceptance would have enabled them to remain within the borders of former Poland—true, not in the large cities, for which, in Soviet Russia, one needed a special permit, but in the villages and small towns. To a few Jews this seemed the better choice; though they too regarded Soviet life as a perpetual slavery, they hoped that the end of the war might bring a change for the better. The majority, however, refused Soviet passports and were deported by the thousands.

This particular mass deportation was the third consecutive one in a series of three: the first two, almost immediately after the Soviet occupation, had swept up high-ranking Polish officials, prominent liberals, and most of the landowners, merchants, aristocrats, and high clergy, as well as professional men of all kinds and some military men, although many of these latter had succeeded in escaping to Hungary and Rumania or finding hiding places in the forests; and also large numbers of well-to-do peasants and minor government employees, such as foresters, gardeners, and the like.

AS IS not unusual with Soviet enterprises, the deportations were not carried out in an orderly or consistent manner. There were many mistakes, contradictory orders, and much confusion, some of it—as we found out later—quite deliberate on the part of the authorities.

While our documents were being examined just before the train left, a Soviet passport was discovered among the Polish

ones. It belonged to a young Jew, a ruddy, freckled, kind-faced man, a shoemaker by trade. He was weeping and, when asked why he was with the deportees since he had a Russian passport, he replied that he wanted to go to Siberia because while he was away from home at work he had heard that his wife was being deported. He had not found her at home and he said that the Soviet officials at the station had told him that his wife had already left and that he would be able to join her in exile. He had been married only three months, he had waited seven years for his wife, and he simply could not live without her. We made room for Nukhim and he remained with us. Sixteen days later, when we arrived at our destination, Nukhim found that his wife wasn't there. A little later he was informed that she had never been sent out of Poland at all. All his pitiful entreaties to be allowed to return to Poland were of no avail. He had to remain in exile and his good Soviet passport was confiscated by the authorities with accompanying mockery. Although he was a good artisan, with a trade much needed in the locality, he had to go to work with the rest of us as a lumberjack.

Families were frequently separated, either through carelessness or on purpose, and the tragedies that followed were heart-rending. When the deportation first began, late in June, only single men were arrested, and a rumor spread that women, old men, and children were safe from deportation. Because of this, many married men, feeling reasonably secure about their families, left them all their belongings and ready cash and went into hiding. Then, very suddenly, just those women, old men, and children began to be deported, and in large numbers. On hearing of this, their fathers, brothers, and husbands came out of hiding and rushed to the trains. There they were summarily arrested and deported, but not—as they had hoped—together with their families. In many cases they never saw their families again.

One such family man, a Jewish merchant, was in our car. He wore a summer suit and his whole luggage consisted of a leather

briefcase with a towel, shaving gear, a piece of soap, and one change of underwear. While he was hiding in the house of a business friend, his wife and two children, a son and daughter in their teens, had been taken away. When he came running to the station to look for them, he was told by the Russians to get into our train—and that was that. A burly, strong man, with a thoughtful, intelligent face, he was the first among us to feel real misgivings. Somehow he realized that the assurances flung so curtly by the Soviet officials that families would be reunited at their places of destination were all false. At first he sat quietly on his briefcase, without exchanging a word with anyone. Once in a while he held his head between his hands and groaned softly. Only later did he lose his composure.

LIKE so many other prisoners' cars, ours was an ordinary freight car equipped with a row of double-decker wooden bunks along each side, the corridor in the middle being reserved for our luggage and four extra persons. Each car had to accommodate thirty-two people altogether, and there were fifty cars in the train. A hole in the middle provided the common toilet. Each bunk was occupied by two prisoners. The first forty-eight hours of our voyage we were given no food at all; after that some thin gruel and bread were distributed once every twenty-four hours, usually at night. The majority of the prisoners in our car were Jews, some well-to-do and middle-class people, but for the most part poor working people. None of us knew where we were going or how long it would take, and soon our feelings of uncertainty and fear, now reinforced by the appalling conditions of travel, began to have a physical effect. Several persons became ill. One woman had a hemorrhage, and when we approached the Soviet doctor who accompanied the train, asking him to take her to a hospital in the nearest town, he answered: "Don't bother so much about your security and your health. You have lived all your life sucking poor people's blood; now you will live on your own fat." His prophecy

turned out to be quite true, for most of us lost from thirty to fifty pounds while in exile. When I left Russia I weighed eighty-four pounds, less than two-thirds of my normal weight.

After we had crossed the Polish-Soviet border, and as we got closer to our final destination, regulations were slowly relaxed. We were allowed to get out at stops and buy articles and food at the station buffets. On the second or third day of the journey, as our train was rolling along slowly, another train caught up with us on the track alongside. It was a prisoners' train like ours, full of Poles. Seeing this, Nukhim, the young shoemaker, usually quiet and self-effacing, pressed close to the barred window and began to cry in a forlorn voice: "Lalcia, my Lalcia! This is Nukhim! Answer me!" From then on he did this whenever another train passed us, calling dismally to the blurred faces in the barred windows of the passing cars. Soon the strong, self-contained merchant began to do the same. Every time a prisoners' train passed alongside us he too ran towards the small window and shouted out the names of his wife and children. Sometimes his desperate calls infected us and we would join in and call out their names with him. Then the train would finally pass, the shouts and cries would die down, and the merchant would return to his corner and his quiet despair.

One day in the second week of the journey the train stopped at a little station—already inside Siberia—and presently another train came in and stopped on the next siding. Then one of those things happened that make you believe in miracles. For in the second train our merchant found his wife and children. They met on the track, crying and joyfully embracing each other, and many of us, crowding around, were moved almost as much as they at the sight of their happiness. But guards came running up almost immediately and ordered us to disperse. Crying, pleading, imploring did not help. The guards had only one answer: "You will find each other at the place of your destination." This, of course, was a barefaced lie.

The merchant was sent much farther into Siberia, into a different region entirely, and when, after many weeks, he succeeded, through correspondence with relatives in Lvov, in discovering the whereabouts of his family, he found that his son had been separated from his mother and sent out to do field work, while mother and daughter went to a lumbering camp.

ON THE sixteenth day of the journey, our train reached a town on a river in far Siberia. Here we were transferred into barges, taken up the river, and two days later disembarked at a big camp near the forest in which we were to work.

The barracks in which I was placed had one door at one end and two small windows, high up under the roof. It was very dark. Along its entire length ran three rows of bunks, side by side, so that only one narrow corridor in the middle was left free for passage. While inside we could only lie or sit on the bare board twenty-one inches wide that was allotted to each of us. The place had no stove or any kind of furniture. There were married couples without children, single women, mothers with daughters, and a few couples with small children. All who could carry a big saw or an ax were sent out into the forest to fell trees. A few young boys were selected for field work farther away.

To reach the forest we had to walk about a mile and a quarter. The average daily pay bought about two and a quarter pounds of black bread. Pay was increased only if one could exceed the quota, a feat out of the question for most of us. At the commissary we were given tea with sugar twice a day, and once a day some *kasha* or a thin soup, and once in a great while some potato with fat or a piece of meat. Most of the women, including myself, earned only enough for a little over a pound of bread. At first those of us who had brought some money with us bought additional food in the local canteen: marmalade, a piece of herring, or canned food. The local natives also traded there; we had to stand in long lines and there were frequent quarrels. The food parcels that we

were permitted to receive from home literally saved our lives. Many who did not receive parcels and had no money with which to buy food became gravely ill. But all of us suffered from malnutrition; we lost our teeth, became victims of night blindness (nyctalopia), boils, and various eruptions. Many also had frozen feet and hands. Accidents and injuries from falling trees were frequent.

With physical deterioration, moral depression followed very rapidly. We began to understand that we had been sent out here because we had come with ideas of freedom from a world hated by the Bolsheviks. The general feeling of gloom and hopelessness was accentuated all the more by the few individuals who somehow managed to retain their humor and hope and who could impart a measure of it to the others. There was an old Jewish woman called Estera in our camp. She was past seventy, still plump and strong, with a face like an old wrinkled apple and black eyes that were lively and young. She spoke excellent Polish, full of folk idioms, proverbs, and sayings, and remembered many a tale with which to amuse us in the evenings. Her laughter was gay and young, and she laughed a great deal.

ESTERA, together with her seventy-five-year-old husband, had been deported from Eastern Poland, where they had been staying with her sister after fleeing from the Nazis. Her husband was an excellent cabinet-maker. As a young man he had spent several years in America. On a visit to Poland which was supposed to have lasted merely a few weeks, he fell in love with Estera, then eighteen, and remained for good because she didn't want to leave Poland. They had had a happy life, many children and grandchildren. Perhaps it was her happy past that gave Estera the courage to talk to the authorities as she did, arguing with them with a good deal of humor and complete dignity.

One evening she was called to the commandant, and returned vastly amused. "Do you know what he wanted to know?" she told me. "He said that since we were working people we probably had been quite poor

because Poland was a 'land of *pans*.'* You know what I answered? 'Why,' I said, 'we had three houses, all from the profits of our work. Only part of that was paid for with the money my husband brought from America. The rest came from our earnings. Because you see, Pan Soviet, in Poland good work was well paid for. Even the parish priest ordered his furniture from us. No skilled worker in Poland had to count his bread by the gram as you do here in Russia.'" She laughed loudly as she told us this.

But Soviet authorities don't like to be criticized. Shortly after that Estera and her husband were summarily transferred to another camp (frequent transfers were part of the system by which the prisoners were constantly harassed and worn down). This was very hard on old people who had not the strength to carry their belongings. For Estera and her husband it amounted to a catastrophe. Very frequently, not only private possessions such as clothes and cooking utensils had to be taken along, but even the boards of one's bunk, because the next camp was likely to have no bunk boards or only old ones infested with bedbugs.

We saw Estera again several months later and this time she was neither healthy nor gay. Her feet were swollen and she could not leave her bunk. Her husband was very ill. When she finally managed to leave the bunk to go to the commandant to ask if they could call a doctor—since neither could walk the several miles to the nearest hospital through the woods and heavy snow—he refused. Estera could not understand this refusal. She offered all kinds of arguments to prove that she had the right to demand a physician. The commandant kept silent. When in desperation she finally lost her temper and shouted: "Well, what will happen, Mr. Commandant?" his impassive face twitched lightly and a mean smile crooked his face. With his foot shod in a high military boot, he kicked the ground with all his

**Pan* in Polish stands for both "master" and "mister." Thus "land of *pans*" means literally "land of masters," but "*Pan* Soviet" means "Mr. Soviet."

strength: "What will happen?" he yelled. "Here, under this ice, we shall bury you and your husband! There's enough room for all of you here!"

As she told me of this conversation she cried bitterly—the same Estera who a few months ago had thought that tears and complaints were signs of cowardice.

Estera and her husband were buried under the ice as the commandant had predicted: the old man at the end of winter, Estera in the spring. When the former died the ground was so hard that we could not dig a grave. For three days we kept a fire over one spot until at last we could break through the frozen earth.

As the winter wore on some other prisoners died too, younger and stronger than Estera and her husband. The cold was extreme, sometimes as low as eighty below zero, and we all suffered from malnutrition and inadequate clothing. The only store in the settlement seldom sold anything worthwhile. It was a shed divided into two parts: one for food, the other for general merchandise. In the latter only fans and musical instruments were always available; all other goods were sold out on the day they arrived. Queues were long and physical endurance alone enabled one to buy something on occasion, since no one knew in advance when or what goods would come in. Once I asked for shoelaces but was told that one of the two saleswomen had just had a baby and that I would have to wait two weeks until she returned to work. The other shop saleswoman was unable to sell me the shoelaces because the pregnant one had had no time to make an inventory before going to the hospital.

ALMOST worse than all the physical suffering, however, was the feeling of being doomed, the terrible uncertainty about the future, the complete isolation from the outer world, and the cold and mocking contempt with which the camp authorities treated us. Even the Polish Communists among us—there were a few young Jews who had been ardent Communists back home—were treated the same way. One of them, an educated

young clerk full of Marxism, who tried to persuade the commandant that his ideology entitled him to some special treatment, was told brusquely: "I don't know you. Since the local authorities decided that you had to be sentenced to a labor camp, they probably knew what they were doing."

The reputed relaxation of religious intolerance was also a fable—at least in the camps and at that period. All Jews, including the most orthodox, had to work on Saturdays and on other Jewish holidays. They were forbidden to congregate for prayer in spite of a petition. For months they bore all this patiently; then came the Day of Atonement and their pent-up bitterness flared out in a cry of lament, despair, and, finally, in indignant revolt.

In our barracks about four-fifths of the prisoners were Jews, the rest Gentile Poles. Returning from work in the woods at sundown of the eve of Yom Kippur, the prisoners tried to get themselves clean, a terribly difficult thing to do with but two chipped bowls for the entire crowd. Although it was still autumn, in this far northern climate we had already had our first frost, and had just been given a small iron stove by the authorities. But it was so cold that the water in the bowls quickly froze over. Because the one narrow passage in the center of the barracks was usually full of luggage, sacks, and various odds and ends, it was hard to keep clean, especially as many of us worked on night shifts, and day and night we tracked dirt in from the outside.

Ordinarily, this state of affairs was accepted as inevitable. On this night, however, we all tried to sit quietly on our bunks while some of the women scrubbed the dirty floor of the passage and covered it with pine boughs. Dusk came early and in a spirit of calm, amid prayers, the people lighted candles for the souls of the dead. Small babies were hushed by their mothers and there came a moment when we all felt united with the God who is one to all believers and to whom we prayed on that night with all the strength of our hearts, our longing, and our undefeated hope.

Suddenly the door of the barracks opened and the two NKVD officials in charge of the camp walked in. The ranking officer had Kalmuck features, the other was a pale-faced, blond Russian with blue eyes. Both were young, dressed in elegant uniforms, high boots, fur caps, leather jackets, with revolvers strapped to their belts.

"What's going on in here?" asked the older one in a sharp voice. "What are these candles for? What does it all mean?"

THERE was complete silence.

He began to question individual prisoners, stopping before those who held candles in front of them. The prisoner would either keep silent or shrink back, expecting a blow. Some held their hands in front of their candles, as if shielding them from the Russian. He went from person to person, asking the same question, and his voice grew louder and sharper, and finally it rose to a shout as he stopped in front of one young Jew. A skilled worker from Warsaw, he was very popular among us, for he was always calm and serene, helpful to others and full of quiet courage. He had got married a day before his deportation and was here with his young wife, worrying over her a great deal, for she was frail and the work in the forest was too hard for her. When the NKVD man stopped in front of his bunk, the young man rose to his feet and for a moment they both stood there silently, face to face.

"This candle," said the young Jew in a strong voice, "is burning for the soul of my father. All the candles you see here are burning for the souls of our dead. This was so decreed by our Lord God who is Everlasting and we are fulfilling his commandment by fasting and praying on this Day of Atonement."

There was complete quiet and we heard only the beating of our hearts. The officer stepped back a pace and stood without motion. Then he burst into harsh laughter and, with the help of his companion, began knocking over the candles. "We have no holiday tomorrow. Everybody must go to work!"

They left and the barracks was plunged into gloom. All of us broke down, Gentile and Jew alike, and cried in helpless anger.

ON THE following morning, while it was still dark, the NKVD men came back to see that the order to work was carried out. All of us refused, some shyly, others very firmly. The latter were sent out immediately to the police station, where they were held in a special unheated detention hut. Some of the more timid of us then gave in and went to work. Wives began to implore husbands to do the same; others, on the contrary, encouraged their men to resist the order. The NKVD threatened us with trial and imprisonment. In the meantime all the men already in the detention hut began to pray in unison, turning the place into a synagogue. The infuriated Soviet commandant tried to stop them, but they continued to pray. Those who went to work refused food all day and many fainted from lack of strength.

On the Gentile Poles in the camp there descended a mood of great depression verging on despair. These Catholics, who numbered only a few dozen against hundreds of Jews, felt almost equally insulted and morally degraded by the indignity received. We all now prayed secretly, feeling with a great and sudden insight that, defenseless and betrayed as we were, and thousands of miles from home, we had no hope and no recourse but God.

At night when prisoners returned from their work in the forest, all the arrested men were freed. A few weeks later a Soviet judge arrived at the camp. He had a Kalmuck face and, like most Soviet judges, no proper legal training. A mass trial of those who had refused to go to work was held the same night. A few of the prisoners were sentenced to four months of prison; the rest had their pay reduced for six months. For many this meant sickness, for some even death.

One evening of full moon around that time the oldest Jew in the camp, a gaunt man with a white and flowing beard, called his youngest relative and both went outside

to pray. Two of this man's sons had been sentenced to prison and he had not heard from them since. In his black long *kapote*, he stood in the white snow under the magnificent polar sky, which blinked with myriads of stars, and holding up his arms, he prayed.

I stood near the door of the barrack and saw his return: he looked frozen; icicles were hanging from his white beard, but a smile illumined his face and he seemed confident and consoled. He stopped near me and said: "We must have confidence; we must not despair. For God has just come to me and said that one night he will lead us out of this country of slaves."

I listened in disbelief, yet strangely moved. Soon after, the old man died.

TOWARDS the end of the summer of 1941 I fell ill. I had a high fever that lasted a long time. Finally I was taken to the hospital in the neighboring town. This evoked general envy. A hospital in Soviet Russia is the only place where you can be sure of some food, where you get a bed, and where they leave you alone. Since everybody, all who are ill and even some who are not, dreams of getting into a hospital, Soviet physicians have to be very careful about admissions. If a doctor admits a "well" person, he becomes personally responsible for his mistake and ends up as a prisoner himself. To be admitted to a hospital, you have to have a temperature of at least 102 degrees. Where we were, the little primitive wooden hospital of eight beds, with a maternity ward, one physician, and several nurses, was an institution that commanded respect. To me it was the one truly commendable result of the Bolshevik Revolution.

At the time I was sent there the hospital was practically empty and I was the only patient in the women's section. In the men's ward was a young Jewish boy who had been deported together with his grandfather. The grandfather wore a black caftan and had a white beard with *peyes*. His grandson was terribly thin, frail, stooped, and racked by a constant cough. After I had improved a bit,

he came over to ask me how I felt. We got acquainted and he asked me for some books. The only thing I had with me was Plato's *Symposium* in a Polish translation. I gave it to him, rather doubtful of its reception, but his eyes lit up at the sight of it. He said he knew it but would love to re-read it. He told me he should like to learn Greek, for "You will admit, madam," he said, "that the Greeks created the form of democracy as the Jews created the faith in one single God."

HE HAD studied in a rabbinical school and was crammed with knowledge for one so young. He knew English quite well and told me that he had even tried to read some Shakespeare, but his passionate interest was religion and psychology. He hated Karl Marx and the Bolsheviks. "This system which excludes the existence of God cannot exist or grow. Bolsheviks deprived people of God without giving them anything in exchange. Their equality is a fiction; their freedom is slavery—and their brotherhood? Why, here every man is afraid of the next man, he is afraid to talk to him." He paused. "And yet now, in this place, I feel the presence of God more than at any other time in my life. And this feeling is the only thing that they cannot take away from me."

I asked him what he thought of the Jewish problem in Russia. "In Russia the Jewish problem doesn't exist," he replied. "That is because in Russia Jews as such don't exist. When I used to pray in Poland on some Jewish holiday, I felt that on that same day a Jew in England, Germany, or America was worshiping the same way I did. Jewish faith and culture persisted all over the world in spite of this dispersion and this was our true link. I don't believe much in Palestine. Palestine is small and uncertain. But I do believe in the power of faith and of Jewish culture. An American Jew serves his country well, yet he retains his faith, he remains a Jew. But in Russia? The Jew in Russia is deprived of his faith; he can celebrate only the revolutionary holidays. He eats what the rest of them eat or whatever he finds in a store. My grandfather, who ate all his life

according to our Orthodox religion, now lives on bread and water. Jews who marry Russians have children who are Jewish no longer. All this appeals to the dreamy idealism of a small group of assimilated European Jewish intelligentsia and this is the reason for their cult of Communism and their belief that only Russia offers a heaven for Jews. But to me, in this general and forced assimilation of Jewry lies their very ruin."

His eyes shone feverishly and his hands tightened into fists: "For us Jews Russia is a place where we lose our faith and our souls."

ONE evening early in August, shortly after getting out of the hospital, I had returned to the barracks from the forest, exhausted by work and the excessive heat. A neighbor brought me a cup of hot water and a small saucer of berries that she had gathered in the woods, and we sat down outside the door to rest. It was quiet in the forest, the heat of the day had begun gradually to subside, and I was engulfed as usual in a kind of resigned stupor. Then I noticed a young Jewish boy emerge from among the trees. He had been sent to the nearest settlement earlier in the day because of severe abdominal pains. As he came closer we saw him waving his arms; then we heard him laughing and shouting. We had had no newspapers for some days and I thought fleetingly, "Probably some victory over the Germans," and returned to my apathy. Victory in the faraway West was an empty term in our kind of existence; it had no longer the power to move us or to dispel the hopeless gloom.

The boy was now quite close. He had a newspaper in his hand and was pointing to it and shouting. Some other prisoners, closer to him than we, began to run towards him. Suddenly in the clamor of voices I discerned the words "We are free!" Then I heard the word "*Amnestja! Amnestja!*" They were all shouting together, laughing and crying, the small rag of news sheet being torn from hand to hand. I got up trembling and went closer. And then I too saw the few terse printed

words that proclaimed the gift of freedom.

The door of the commandant's office opened suddenly and he stepped out:

"Stop this noise!"

We quieted down. He approached the boy with his gliding, cat-like step and tore the newspaper from his hand: "I told you not to bring any paper from town!" he shouted.

"But the amnesty—" someone in the crowd replied.

"What d'you think this is? A club? Return to the barracks and go to sleep!"

We obeyed. But we could not sleep. In the eery, unearthly light of the Siberian summer night we gathered in knots in the corners of our barracks and discussed in whispers the momentous but as yet incomplete news. Who was going to be freed? Did the amnesty apply to all Polish prisoners? Or only some? How did it happen? Would we be really free to leave Russia? And where would we go from there?

Late that night a young Polish engineer walked into our barracks; he was smiling and said in a loud voice: "They've called our commandants to the village. Something must be going on. We're here alone." The excitement rose. We passed freely among the various barracks, talking.

The following day was a Sunday. Our commandant returned from the village, together with a political supervisor. He sat down on the ground and told us about the agreement between General Sikorski and Stalin. This time we knew for certain that we would be free.

We had to work for two more weeks. Then the Russians announced that we could leave.

NOT everyone was able to leave: it was necessary to have money for railroad tickets and for food during the journey. But even for those of us who could leave, it was a terrible journey. We went to the south, for the rumor had spread that we would find there a re nascent Polish Army being organized under General Anders in accordance with the treaty. But before we reached our

destination, we were diverted to work on collective farms, in factories, and on road-building gangs; I spent half a year picking cotton under conditions reminiscent of scenes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Hunger, lice, and epidemic disease followed us faithfully—in fact, the highest rate of mortality occurred just during these last disastrous months before we were allowed to go to Persia. But that is another sad story. . . .

When at last we reached the place where the Polish Army was being organized, three other prisoners and I rented a room from some local Uzbeks. The house was made of mud and had no furniture. We slept on improvised beds made of blankets, our bags under our heads.

In the yard of this establishment there lived some other people: Tartars, Uzbeks, and Russians. To my surprise they seemed to get along together quite well, without much quarrelling. At first they were suspicious of us Poles but in time accepted us in a friendly manner. I made friends with a cat and, later, with its owner, a charming little girl of nine, the daughter of the Russian neighbor. When I gave the child a white silk ribbon for her hair her mother came to thank me and exchanged a few careful words. There were no men left in her family: two had gone to the war, two were in prison. The woman never explained why or for how long. These were subjects of a sort Russians never discussed.

THE room next to ours was occupied by a Jewish family: an old couple and two adult daughters, both red-headed, sullen and ugly. Their father was very ill and never left his bed; their mother, gray-haired, prematurely old, and very thin, moved about like a shadow. They were refugees from the Ukraine. One day the old mother asked me for a needle. She knew that I had some still from Poland, and explained that she had had none for a year, for no needles were to be had in that district. I brought the needle over that night. The room was much like ours, except for the old man's bed in the

corner. The women slept on blankets in the other corner. Under the window there stood a table made of plain planks and two wooden benches. I found the old woman in tears. Her husband was worse, and her daughters were not at home.

I tried to comfort her and then, rather suddenly, the woman broke down and began to complain. (Incidentally, neither complaints nor comforting are normal human manifestations in Soviet Russia, where everyone strictly minds his own business.) "My husband," she said, "was a merchant in the days of the Czar. We were well off in spite of anti-Semitism. Now, you can see, we live like dogs. Even our religion they took away from us. It used to be I lit candles on Friday and we celebrated all the Jewish holidays; there was a lot to eat and to drink and we always had enough clothes. My daughters are Communists, party members, so I can't complain to them. If I do, all I hear is that I am a stuffy *burzhuika*. And they are no longer Jewish, my daughters. One is marrying a Ukrainian, the other doesn't know a thing about our faith. Only I alone can speak quietly with our God. But sometimes I doubt if he hears me from here."

"On the other hand they haven't any anti-Semitism here," I said.

"Don't you believe it, *Pani*." She spoke in a passionate whisper. "They have severe punishment for anti-Semitism, so the people try to conceal it and sit tight. Here they don't even allow the word 'Jew,' because, they say, it is offensive. But they hate us as they always did. I feel this."

As I left the room in the murky dark someone grabbed me by my hand. I screamed, "Who is it?" It was only the little Russian girl. In the dim shadows I recognized the white ribbon I had given her.

"Don't go there!" the child said fiercely under her breath. "You probably don't know. They're Jews!" Then she vanished in the dark. I stood for a moment in the doorway. It was quiet. In this far alien sky the stars winked coldly. Shivering, I returned to my room.